

Curragh History Archives



The Curragh Civil War Executions December 19th 1922

Eighty years ago, in December 1922, the Curragh Camp was the scene of a terrible tragedy; it was the execution, by firing squad, of seven young men in the Military Detention Barracks, now the Curragh Prison. The full story of the events of the week from 13 December 1922, when the men were arrested, to 19 December 1922, when they were executed, is not now known. All of the people involved are dead, and with them their stories. It appears that all official records of the executions have been lost or destroyed.



Military Detention Barracks

The events took place during the Civil War. Successful military operations by the Free State forces had led, by the end of 1922, to the cessation by the anti-treaty side of conventional operations and they had resorted to guerrilla warfare directed against supply lines and communications. The Curragh Camp was occupied by the Free State Army while a small column of Irregulars, as those supporting the anti-treaty side in arms were termed, operated in the vicinity of Kildare town. Most of this small column were railway employees and they largely confined their operations to trying to disrupt the operation of the railway line in the vicinity of Kildare town.



Moore's Bridge The Curragh

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The Leinster Leader of 23 December 1922 reported that a column of ten men had operated against railways, goods trains and shops in the vicinity of Kildare for some time. Five of them had apparently taken part in an attempt to disrupt communications by derailing engines on 11 December. Two engines had been taken from a shed at Kildare and one of them had been sent down the line into an obstruction at Cherryville, thereby blocking the line. It was also alleged that goods trains had been looted and shops robbed in the locality. The same column was also reported to have taken part in an ambush of Free State troops at the Curragh siding on 25 November. On 13 December the men were surprised in a dug-out at a farmhouse at Moore's Bridge, on the edge of the Curragh plains, by Free State troops. In the dug-out were ten men, ten rifles, a quantity of ammunition, and other supplies. The men were arrested and conveyed to the Curragh. The proprietress of the farmhouse was also arrested and lodged in Mountjoy Prison. Controversy surrounds the circumstances of the death of Thomas Behan, one of the men. One version has it that his arm was broken when he was being apprehended and he was subsequently killed by a blow of a rifle butt on the head, at the scene of the raid when he was unable to climb on the truck that conveyed the men to the Curragh. The official version was that he was shot when attempting to escape from a hut in which he was detained in the Curragh Camp.



Irish Civil War executions were carried out by firing squad

Sometime between 13-18 December seven of the men were tried before a military court. They were found guilty of being in possession of arms without authority and sentenced to death. The day before their execution the seven men were ministered to by Father Donnelly, chaplain in the Curragh.

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The seven men executed were:

- **Stephen White (18)**
Abbey St., Kildare
- **Joseph Johnston (18)**
Station Rd., Kildare
- **Patrick Mangan (22)**
Fair Green, Kildare
- **Patrick Nolan (34)**
Rathbride, Kildare
- **Brian Moore (37)**
Rathbride, Kildare (Leader of the column)
- **James O'Connor (24)**
Bansha, Co. Tipperary
- **Patrick Bagnall (19)**
Fair Green, Kildare

May they Rest in Peace



The execution was carried out by firing squad at 8.30 a.m. on the 19th December 1922 in the Military Detention Barracks, Curragh Camp. It was the biggest single execution carried out in the Civil War.

The men were allowed to write final letters the night before their execution and some of these were later published in the republican paper *Eire*, (The Irish Nation) of 31 March 1923. Letters written by Stephen White were not published, but one of them I reproduce here with the permission of his relatives, which is representative of the rest:

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HARE PARK PRISON
CURRAGH
KILDARE.
18th December, 1922,

Dear Father

I am writing this letter, sorry to say it is my last as I am to die at 8.15 tomorrow, Tuesday. I am sorry I cannot see any of you before I go, but, I hope by the time you get this to be with my poor Mother In Heaven, with God's help. I hope you will all say a prayer for me. I never saw Jimmie since the night we were arrested, but, thank God it is me instead of him that was to go. He will be more use to you than I would, and tell him if ever he gets out, which, with the help of God, he will, to start work and give up this game as it is not worth it.

We have been treated all right since we came here and we were all with the Priest to-day, and will be with him all night. I am sorry I cannot see you all to hid you Good bye “, but, I suppose we will all meet the other side,

I will bid you all a last “Good bye” and pray for me.

GOOD BYE, FATHER.

STEPHEN

The men were buried in the grounds of the Detention Barracks but their remains were later exhumed and lay in state in the Courthouse in Kildare town before being re-buried in Grey Abbey Cemetery, Kildare in 1924. A gravestone was subsequently erected over their grave and a monument erected in the Market Square, Kildare.

In August 2002 two nephews of Stephen White visited Kildare and the Curragh Camp to revisit the scenes of the episode. Stephen White, a son of the Jimmie mentioned in the letter, from England and Paul White, son of another brother, Michael, from Canada met for the first time in 50 years. They visited the Curragh Prison, Moore's Bridge, Grey Abbey Cemetery and the monument in Kildare town square. They are anxious to make contact with anyone who has any information regarding the events of 1922 and to establish contact with any relations who might still be living in the Kildare area.

These terrible events of the Civil War affected some local people for many years. Eighty years later it is fitting to remember the episode as a part of our history and to commemorate the seven young men who lost their lives that December day.

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**Monument erected in memory of the executed men
at the Market Square, Kildare Town**

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